

BOOK WORLDS

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Books

Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*. Trans. M. B. Debevoise. Cambridge, M.A. and London: Harvard University Press, 2004, 420 pages

Richard B. Sher, *The Enlightenment and the Book: Scottish Authors and Their Publishers in Eighteenth-Century Britain, Ireland, and America*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006, 815 pages

Bronwen Wilson, *The World in Venice: Print, The City, and Early Modern Identity*. University of Toronto Press, 2005. 406 pages

IT IS JUST over a quarter of a century since Robert Darnton published his landmark essay in *Daedalus* entitled, “What is the History of Books?” That essay, which has become a kind of manifesto for Book History scholars, hailed one of those rare academic convergences which only ever occur when a number of different fields of study merge together to take on a distinct scholarly identity. Since then, of course, much has changed. Book History no longer needs to fight for recognition but neither does it enjoy quite the same cachet as the newest force to appear on the intellectual horizon. It may have helped to generate a set of tectonic shifts in what James Clifford has described as “the moving earth” of disciplinary relations, but that new landscape has since become familiar to most of us. Book History now boasts at least one major academic association, endless international conferences, highly successful university departments and institutes, fully-fledged doctoral programs, a special issue of the *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association*, and, if that was not a sure enough sign of academic arrival, numerous job postings dedicated specifically to Book Historians. Book History has become the new New Historicism, a compelling means of making our turn towards the past fresh again. But unlike New Historicism, which remained largely the favourite of literary critics who had been reading their Foucault, Book History grew out of genuinely interdisciplinary roots, drawing on the work of historians, literary critics, sociologists, experts in media studies, bibliographers, and librarians.

Darnton’s influential work on those authors who belonged to what he memorably described as “the

low-life of literature . . . who failed to make it to the top and fell back into Grub Street,” absorbed the most exciting elements of the commitment, associated with leftist scholars such as George Rudé and E. P. Thompson, to view history from below. It also enabled critics to wrestle with questions about what it meant to be an author in ways that were not burdened with the ideological freight of what Roland Barthes famously dismissed as the “theological” nature of post-Romantic invocations of the author as a unified source of originary meaning. And in doing so, it breathed new life into questions about how to conceptualize the reading public in ways that were not purely empirical, and which suggested possible connections between issues of cultural consumption and traditionally conceived theories about the intrinsic “meaning” of texts. It rescued the book trade from demeaning associations with the mundane and mercenary world of commerce – the cynical calculations of “the booksellers, those pimps of literature,” as a 1763 edition of the *Critical Review* had described them – by highlighting the publishing industry’s vital role in the process of literary creativity. Not only was there a text in the class (and not just texts but whole books, in all of their obdurate physicality), the whole world seemed to have left its trace in books in important ways that had never occurred or mattered much to literary critics whose version of textuality had little or nothing to do with physical artefacts.

Like most good things, though, this particular outbreak of interdisciplinarity was not without its drawbacks. In his 1982 article, Darnton was already warning that Book History looked “less like a field than a tropical rainforest. The explorer can hardly make his way across it. At every step he becomes entangled in a luxuriant undergrowth of journal articles and disoriented by the crisscrossing of disciplines.” Darnton’s essay was ultimately less a call to arms than an attempt to gain some kind of coherent perspective on this case of “interdisciplinarity run riot,” a bid to find a way “to see the subject as a whole.” His “Communications Circuit,” complete with diagram, initiated one of the central aspects that has defined many Book History approaches ever since: a cartographic impulse to map out both the evolving literary field and the range of methodologies – many of them highly specialized – which critics have brought to bear on it. From Darnton’s communications circuit to Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the field of cultural production

(complete with an even more intricate diagram), the image of the scholar-explorer, trudging heroically through a bookish rainforest, has been doubled by the related image of scholar as map-maker, trying hard, though ultimately never quite successfully, "to see the subject as a whole." These same relations, between an interest in highly specific historical milieus and the wider universe of print history – a willingness to trudge through the literary undergrowth and a desire for critical distance – distinguish three recent books despite their widely different areas of focus.

Richard B. Sher's *The Enlightenment and the Book* focuses on the literary world of the Scottish Enlightenment as it radiated south along an Edinburgh-London axis, and further abroad by way of publishing centres such as Dublin and Philadelphia. Engagingly written and extraordinarily well researched, Sher offers a compelling account of the world of Enlightenment letters that will become an authoritative contribution to our understanding of the relations between authors and booksellers in this historically unprecedented period of intellectual and literary fermentation. As Sher rightly points out, we have become extremely familiar with accounts of what John Brewer has described as the "print revolution" in this period, but all too often, we have been content to recycle generalizations which suffer from their lack of a "concrete understanding of the complex historical processes and interplay of human actors that connected the book trade to the Enlightenment." Building on Brewer's memorable account of eighteenth-century publishing "as an expanding maze or labyrinth," Sher illuminates the many ways that "Enlightenment book publishing" operated as "a negotiated, collaborative, often contested activity that occurred within the economic, technological, legal, and intellectual contexts of the day." Juggling this many different lines of analysis (economics, technology, law, intellectual history) can be tricky if we are to take each of them seriously as crucial elements of the book trade, but Sher's ability to do just that is one of the great strengths of the book. Bolstered by impeccable research, his book handles complexity with extraordinary ease, not least in its determination to portray relations between publishers and authors in ways that do not tip the balance of analysis in either direction, and which are never distorted by misleading assumptions that restrict one of these groups "to the realm of the mind and the other to the realm of the purse." Scotland, and especially Edinburgh, offers an ideal focus for this type of study, not just because of the extraordinary success of Scottish authors in this period, but just as importantly because of the high degree of self-consciousness with which they recognized themselves as a unified literary community bound together by a

broad set of Enlightenment values and commitments, and by their complex loyalty to Scotland and simultaneous respect for London as the real publishing centre of literature in English.

The first of the three sections which comprise *The Enlightenment and the Book* fuses a materialist emphasis with more theoretically inflected approaches in order to explore the various strategies which authors exploited in their quest for social distinction. From the various concerns which informed publishers' decisions about when to release works in folio, duodecimo, quarto, and octavo forms (Sher's description of Hume's active interest in the format of various editions of his *Essays* and his *History of England* is especially interesting), to the choice of binding, to the strategic role of dedications, to subtleties of authors' portraits, to the different messages implied by the ways that authors were referred to on title pages, to their various contractual options with publishers, authors delivered their goods to the public in a boldly entrepreneurial and highly mediated environment which consistently highlighted the full ideological force of the physicality of literary texts. Sher divides his focus between these sorts of mediating factors and the more personal dimensions, from the social milieu which many of these authors emerged out of to the lively sociability which characterized their professional lives in literary Edinburgh to the fate of many of those who wound up working in Grub Street. The real value of this section is not only Sher's ability to synthesize the ideological world that Bourdieu has taught us to associate with the inner workings of the literary field and its crucial material realities, but his refusal to be hemmed in by the usual crippling disciplinary boundaries. He is as comfortable discussing a best-selling text like William Guthrie's *A New Geographical, Historical, and Commercial Grammar; and Present State of the Several Kingdoms of the World* as he is any work by Hume or Adam Smith.

Sher is at his best, though, in his account of the ways that Scottish publishers, many of them having set up shop in London, presided over the enterprise of publishing Scotland's most important figures in ways that extended far beyond their role as businessmen into the realm of cultural authorities or patrons. It is extraordinary and too rarely emphasized how thoroughly they dominated the field, in London as much as Scotland, led primarily by the transplanted Scot, Andrew Millar, who was immortalized by Samuel Johnson as "the Maecenas of the age," and who acted in a kind of informal partnership with the printer, William Strachan (who anglicized his name to Strachan when he set up shop in London), but also in conjunction with the Edinburgh publisher, Alexander Kincaid. Together they presided over the industry,

carefully promoting Scottish authors whose texts reflected their own Enlightenment faith in the social importance of the printed word, often paying authors more than any other publisher was willing to, releasing their works in handsome quarto editions, and even sometimes making them voluntary payments if these books sold well enough to go into further editions. Their treatment of the Scottish author, James Ferguson, offers a compelling example of the ways these relations could extend beyond business to new forms of patronage suited to the needs of a modern commercial society. Millar sponsored science lectures by Ferguson at Bath and other fashionable spa towns that Millar frequented later in life. Millar's business heir, Thomas Cadell, was named the executor in Ferguson's will, and Strachan served as one of the pallbearers at Ferguson's funeral. These patrons of modern literature took their role seriously enough to think carefully about the impact of their own mortality on the Edinburgh–Scottish axis which they'd constructed. Cadell worked faithfully with Strachan and with Kincaid, but, concerned that Kincaid's possible successor, John Bell, was not adequately committed to this fraternal relationship (in part because Bell was less willing to defer to the judgement of a more powerful London publishing house, even if it was run by Scots), Cadell convinced Kincaid to pass the firm on to William Creech, who seemed likely to be more deferential to his London partners and with whom Cadell did indeed continue to dominate the field. As Sher demonstrates, the influence of Scots, which often seemed to be strongest beyond Scotland's borders, extended to centres such as Dublin and Philadelphia. The final section, which expands the book's range of focus, challenges the negative stereotype of Dublin as a mere source of cheap pirated editions, and highlights how publishers such as Robert Bell and Robert Aitken worked to encourage the diffusion of knowledge and books in ways that carried the Scottish Enlightenment far beyond its own borders, and well beyond any strictly commercial enterprise.

Bronwen Wilson's *The World in Venice: Print, The City, and Early Modern Identity* extends debates about print culture into the domain of art history and back to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Venice, a vibrant cosmopolitan city which functioned as the commercial hub of an extensive empire linking travelers to the East. Beginning with Jacopo de'Barbari's extraordinary woodcut illustration of Venice – the design required six pearwood blocks, each measuring 980 X 680 mm – but ranging across a number of similar prints, Wilson offers a nuanced reading of the ways that the various prints' characteristics, from their use of the birds-eye-view

perspective to the effects of the legends, processions, histories, and portraits which began to frame the actual image of the city, forced viewers to negotiate their sense of the relations between the implied unity of the city as a whole and the contingencies of everyday life in the street. In doing so they invited the viewer “to examine one's relation to place and history, to put one's identity into perspective.” (256) Much of Wilson's analysis of these city prints turns on precisely this question of perspective: the ways these prints subordinated particular architectural features and urban sites to a more forceful sense of the city as a unified whole, with all of the implications this suggested for a civically oriented model of subjectivity. But her analysis is equally attuned to the hurly-burly of Venetian commerce, especially as it relates to the coronation of the doge's wife in 1597. The extravagance of the event, complete with three days of festivities including *regatta* and elaborate war games, may have run against the grain of Venice's typically more sober tone of republican restraint, but local merchants showed no aversion to cashing in with a slew of medals, commemorative portraits, related engravings and maps framed with details of the festivities. Like many of his contemporaries, Giacombo Franco exploited the intensity of the public's response to sell off slightly rejigged copies of badly outdated maps. If the development of an ethnic richness which included sectors made up of German Protestants, Muslim traders from the Ottoman Empire, and thriving Turkish and Jewish communities, simultaneously enhanced the city's cosmopolitan appeal and troubled efforts to imagine the city as a unified and knowable whole, print-makers responded by offering a range of costume books, often based on the taxonomic impulse of botanical studies, as a way of rendering the world knowable by reducing it to categories. Costume books distinguished between various ethnic communities across national boundaries but they also organized Venetians' own world into professional, social, and religious categories – kings, captains, doges, popes, artists, sultans. Placing these various functions in their historical context, Wilson offers an admirably detailed analysis of the ways that prints enabled viewers to imagine their city as the world, and to understand their own role in it.

The most ambitious of these three books is in some ways Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters*, which offers “a history of everything” by developing a theoretical model capable of explaining the internal relations which structure the whole of world literature. Casanova's model draws heavily on Bourdieu's work on the literary field as a set of sometimes volatile relations whose ultimately competitive nature is associated with but not

ultimately reducible to the struggles for domination which characterize ordinary political space:

Literary space is not an immutable structure, fixed once and for all in its hierarchies and power relations. But even if the unequal distribution of literary resources assures that such forms of domination will endure, it is also a source of incessant struggle, of challenges to authority and legitimacy, of rebellions, insubordination, and ultimately, revolutions that alter the balance of literary power and rearrange existing hierarchies. . . . From the point of view of the history and the genesis of worldwide space, then, literature is a type of creation that is irreducibly singular and yet at the same time inherently collective, the work of all those who have created, reinvented, or reappropriated the various means at their disposal for changing the order of the literary world and its existing power relations.

Like Bourdieu, Casanova argues that this globalized literary field, which has for the last few centuries been shaped by the indelible force of national traditions, is structured by an opposition between the two poles which mark its limits: the autonomous pole which is distinguished by its release from the burden of political themes into the abstract realm of formal experimentation (Beckett and Joyce are her two primary examples) and which is most closely associated with those nations with the best established literary traditions (such as France and England), and a heteronomous pole “composed of relatively deprived literary spaces at early stages of development that are dependent on political – typically national – authorities.” (108) The latter, which tends to characterize colonial spaces in which culture is bound up with the imperatives of national struggles for social and cultural liberation, is everywhere shaped by an acknowledgment of literature’s proximity to political struggle. These poles mark the extremes of a globalized literary field which functions as a “complex conjunction of a great many positions,” all of them defined by the asymmetrical legacies of imperialism, from decisions about whether to embrace or reject the language of the colonizer, to broader questions about personal assimilation or rebellion, to efforts to jumpstart contending national traditions. Casanova’s breathtaking range of examples on virtually every page, from the Yugoslavian writer, Danilo Kiš, to the Somalian writer, Nuruddin Farah, to the Ivory Coast writer, Ahmadou Kourouma, to Michel Tremblay, to her own Modernist heroes, Beckett, Joyce, and Kafka, underscores her theoretical point about the strategic advantage of an approach which situates writers in terms of the positions they occupy within the broader relations which structure the field. “By describing the dilemmas, choices, and inventions of writers from

outlying spaces as a set of mutually related positions – the definition of one being inseparable from that of any other – it becomes possible to recast the familiar question of the nature and limits of dominated national literatures,” both in relation to their colonial antagonists and to other writers in geographically disparate but structurally similar contexts.

But Casanova’s sophistication and breadth are offset by equally serious weaknesses, not least of which is a profoundly anachronistic logic of progress that is lodged at the heart of her sense of these poles. There is a kind of teleological wishfulness that runs through her account of these dynamics, as though the holy grail of all writers is this “radical autonomy.” (345–46) Again and again, the “functionalist aesthetic” of those writers who, born into the “malign inevitability” of a colonized or marginal national culture, embrace literature as a means of engaging with the world around them, is cast as a primitive and oppressive and, ultimately, just plain dull condition out of which they yearn to emerge into the sunny realms of those literary circles where people are united by the shared fiction of a “universal literature that is non–national, nonpartisan, and unmarked by political or linguistic divisions.” It may be a fiction but it feels like freedom. “This is why the ultimate step in the liberation of writing and writers, their final proclamation of independence, consists in affirming the autonomous use of a purely literary language, one that submits to none of the laws of grammatical or even orthographic correctness (which, of course, are imposed by states) and that refuses to yield to the usual requirements of intelligibility associated with the most elementary forms of communication, remaining loyal only to the conditions dictated by literary creation itself.” The most daring examples of this are Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, the first “to break with the imperatives of linear narrative, immediate readability, and grammaticality” in favour of “a specifically literary language,” and Beckett, “whose texts are amongst the most autonomous ever imagined,” and who, eager “to rescue literature from its final form of dependence” by pursuing “the most total incomprehension,” achieved “the first truly autonomous literary revolution.”

Pretty radical stuff. Except, of course, that many writers don’t yearn for this release into the radical autonomy of literary abstraction, and don’t feel especially shackled by the challenge of probing the links between their own literary practices and the political predicament of their national cultures. Many of them don’t even dream of having written *Finnegans Wake* or *The Unnameable*. For a lot of writers, political engagement and relevance are even more radical and more compelling than the dream of “total incomprehension.” And these days, that is as

true or even more true of the major centres such as London and Paris where, precisely because the barbed legacy of empire has come home to roost, culture has become more politicized and less easily aligned with canonical literary traditions than ever. It is telling that the examples which Casanova invokes as the vanguard of this revolution are figures such as Joyce and Beckett; her implicit account of this ascent from heteronomous to autonomous writing seems oddly dated but there is little acknowledgement that the dead-end of high Modernism may have had its day. As her use of a phrase like “early stages of development” (in her account of the heteronomous pole) suggests, Casanova’s account sounds a lot like the debates about Third World development which have bedeviled political scientists since the 1950s. The experts who specialize in these sorts of economic debates have long since learned the enormous cost of assuming that nations simply had to go through stages of development, from their “early” colonized states into some kind of historical endpoint that turns out to look a lot like ourselves. It is a sad irony that, political economists having largely seen the error of this approach, literary critics have begun to peddle it as radical.

Casanova’s argument is more sophisticated than I’ve made it sound here, but not always by much. “After Joyce, Samuel Beckett represented a sort of end point in the constitution of Irish literary space and its process of emancipation,” she informs us, not least because of the magnitude of “what he had to do to rescue himself from the danger of national, linguistic, political, and aesthetic rootedness.” It is telling that her account of the Irish context focuses primarily on Yeats, Shaw, and O’Casey, and ends with Beckett. Attention to the ways that more recent writers, from Seamus Heaney and Derek Mahon to Eavan Boland and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, have responded to these same postcolonial tensions without either sinking into the supposed quagmire of “rootedness” or simply innovating themselves out of these sorts of historical pressures would have unsettled the progressivist assumption that Beckett’s work somehow functioned as a kind of vanishing point in these debates. Looking more closely at the work of authors like Boland and Ní Dhomhnaill would have raised the important question of the ways that imperial legacies were cut across by the issue of gender, an aspect of liberation struggles that would have considerably complicated Casanova’s unfaltering treatment of national traditions as the basis of her global vision.

Her equation of high Modernist abstraction with radicalism is reinforced by a second anachronism which runs throughout her book. Eager to join forces with Joyce and Beckett at the vanguard of this literary revolution, Casanova repeatedly emphasizes the

genuinely radical nature of her own break with dominant models of literary criticism. Descriptions of “the persistent tendency of critics to isolate texts from one another,” or claims that “every use of terms drawn from the world of commerce . . . is firmly denied and rejected by critics in favour of a metaphorical and ‘poetic’ interpretation,” may lend her intervention the frisson of a liberation struggle all its own but only by constructing strawman arguments that fly in the face of the most obvious traits of literary criticism today. Her structural account of the sociology of the literary field may well “appear shocking to anyone who has a blinkered view of creative freedom,” but these days that is a small and largely irrelevant crowd. Sociological approaches like this, which seek to map out the underlying relations which structure the literary field, have become the new norm. Her work is no less valuable for all this, but it does make it a bit less revolutionary than she tends to suggest. But as all three books ably demonstrate, none of this should be especially surprising – it might best be viewed as one more example of the sorts of dynamics that have long structured the world of books.

Works Consulted

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